In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have just heard read what may be the most well known and most well loved of all Jesus’ parables—the Parable of the Two Sons, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There are few places in Scripture that give such an accurate portrayal of the futility and folly of sin. But there are also few places in Scripture that give such a moving portrayal of the love of God in Christ, and of the Father’s willingness and eagerness to forgive the sins of his wayward children:

“While he was yet at a distance, [while he was still a long way off (NASB),] his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (v. 20, RSV)

Truly there is no story in the world that is greater than the story of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus his Son. And the good news that is the Gospel is that this story is the truest story there is. This parable is so moving and memorable precisely because it sets forth the story of the love of God in ways that connect with what is common to humanity.

But for all of its loveliness, and all of its common appeal, in the history of the church there is surprising disagreement about how it should be understood. It seems that everyone in the church has sensed that this is the story of humanity’s sin and God’s forgiving and reconciling love. But if this is true, where do we see Jesus in this parable? Some have tried to make the father figure out to be Jesus. But it isn’t the case that Jesus just stayed at home and waited for humanity to return to him, quite the opposite. Some have wanted to make the younger son out to be Jesus, but this doesn’t quite seem right either. Some have wanted to make the fatted calf out be Jesus Christ, since Jesus Christ is the Passover Lamb who has been sacrifice for us. Nobody, it seems, wants to make the elder son out to be Jesus, but in the early church there were many who wanted to make the elder son out to be the angels while the younger son represented all of humankind. Now, none of these preachers and teachers were fools, so they all figured out a way to preach Christ through these perhaps strained interpretations. But, my point in this is that they had the right inclination. They knew that this was the story, as our reading from Second Corinthians put it, the story of God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (5:19).

This past week I was reading a story to Elias and Nathaniel about the 12th century church reformer and monk named Saint Francis of Assisi. About halfway through the book, Nathaniel pointed to a picture of a man in a crowd and asked, is that Jesus? I said that it wasn’t. About a minute later he pointed to someone else in the crowd and asked if that one was Jesus. I said that wasn’t Jesus either. And then Nathaniel got a little exasperated and said, “but Jesus has to be somewhere in this picture.” I think that Nathaniel was quite right. And if this parable is the story of the reconciliation of the world with God, it cannot be
overlooked that God did this in Christ. Again from our Second Corinthians reading: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”

So, Jesus has to be somewhere in this picture. Where is he? For all of this story’s beauty and the emotions that it evokes, I think that this question can ward off some potential pitfalls in understanding this parable.

In this parable, the son comes to his father with the insulting and greedy demand that his father give him his inheritance. It is as if the son were saying that he would prefer that his father were dead. He doesn’t want his father at all anymore, he wants what his father can give him. He takes from his father, goes out into a far country, and wastes all that he has in further folly and greed—dissolute living. He spends what he has received until it is all gone. And then, to make his lot even worse, famine hits the land, so that eventually he wants nothing more than to eat the pods that the pigs ate. He was brought so low, so impoverished, that he envied the pigs their food.

Precisely here is the first place that we see Christ. For when the Word of God took on human flesh, what was he doing but entering into the far country with the publicans and sinners, with unfaithful Israel and the foolish Gentiles? As Karl Barth wrote, commenting on this passage,

> “the way of [Jesus Christ] ... is in fact the way into the far country of a lost human existence—the way in which he accepts identity and solidarity with this lost son, unreservedly taking his place, taking to himself his sin and shame, his transgression, as though He Himself had committed it, making his misery His own as though He Himself had deserved it, and all this in such a way that the frightfulness of this far country, the evil of the human situation, is revealed in its full depths only as it becomes His situation, that of the holy and righteous Son of God.”

The Son of God emptied himself for our sakes, taking on the form of a slave, as Philippians 2 says. We might say, taking the form of a swineherd. God did not merely remain in his home, as it were, waiting for humankind to return, picking ourselves up by our own bootstraps. This parable is not the parable of human self-fulfillment, of human progress. God saw humankind languishing in the mires of a pigsty—poor and helpless, hungry. And precisely this situation was the one that he entered into, making our misery his own, subjecting himself to the suffering and death that was justly ours but that we sought to inflict upon him instead.

Now, of course, he did this precisely as the Holy One of Israel. In identifying with us he did not sin, but he took upon himself the full and complete consequence of sin, as he said to his Father on our behalf when he hung on the cross: “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Jesus Christ is present, in a hidden way you might say, because he has made this story of destitution his own. He has made the lot of the prodigal his own lot. As our Second Corinthians passage put it, “For our sake [God] made him [that is, made Christ Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21).

1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4/2:23.
Jesus Christ was not embarrassed to eat with tax-collectors and sinners, he was not ashamed to have a harlot anoint his feet with oil and wash him with the tears of her repentance, because he had made their lot his own. Jesus Christ is not ashamed to call you and me his brothers and sisters, he is not embarrassed to call you his beloved, his friends, for he has taken your lot as his own. There is no depth of depravity that you could sink to, no far country that you could go to, that Christ has not already anticipated you.

But then, to return to the parable, from the utter depths of the prodigal’s situation, from the nadir of his existence, from the furthest corner of the far country, the son “returns to himself,” begins to come into his right mind. He remembers the plenty of his father’s house, that even the servants have more than enough. So he resolves to return to his father, to confess his sins, to say that he is not worthy to be called a son, and to ask if he can be taken on as a hired servant. He set off for home with this plan in mind. And this is where the beautiful and moving description of the father’s love is shown:

“While he was yet at a distance, [while he was still a long way off (NASB),] his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (v. 20, RSV)

The son may have arisen, and gone home, but all of the more urgent and eager verbs belong to the father: he sees him, he has compassion, he runs, he embraces, and he kisses. And while the son is in the midst of his confession, the father tells his servants to put the best robe on him, and to give him the ring and the shoes, to kill the festal fatted calf, and prepare to celebrate with dancing and music. (Now I am going to do something that I was told in seminary never to do. I was told to never talk about the Greek underneath the English translation. But, I am going to do it. The Greek word for music here is actually symphonia, symphonies, which I think is just rather lovely. When the elder son approaches, he hears dancing and “symphonies.” That of course wouldn’t mean they were playing Mozart, but it means this was more than just one instrument. This was a great feast, sacrifice the fatted calf, bring all of the musicians. For this feast, nothing was too extravagant. The son’s prodigal and foolish living and wastefulness in the far country was going to be outdone with the father’s loving generosity.)

And, again, where is Christ in this? What is this return of the prodigal to his father but an echo of Jesus Christ’s return to his heavenly Father? The way of the prodigal son’s return is the way of Jesus. And, as Jesus says in John’s Gospel, he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through him. Jesus lived a fully human life, he came into the far country so that he might enter into our lot, our situation of separation from God. And he made our situation his own, even going so far as to drink the very cup of God’s wrath on the cross.

As the father says to the servant and then again to the elder brother, “this, my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (v. 24). The Son of God died. For our sakes he endured death and was lost. But that is not all that he did. After drinking to the dregs the cup of the wrath of God, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and ascended to his Father’s right hand. For our sakes, he is alive again.
And finally, in our humanity, he returned to the Father. Precisely in this return, he paved the way for our own return to the Father. The way of the prodigal son returning to his father is the way of the Son of God returning to his Father, but as a conquering king, bringing along behind him all who will follow, all who believe in him. And so Jesus Christ has truly become the Way. In his own flesh and blood humanity, he is the way to the Father. And he is the way that we are travelling, both through these forty days of Lent but also throughout the whole of our lives.

While we were yet sinners, Christ came into the far country to find us, pick us up out of the poverty and destitution that we had chosen for ourselves. The grace of our Lord, as Paul says later in Second Corinthians, is that “Christ, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor,” entered into our poverty, “so that through his poverty we might become rich” (8:9). Through Christ's entering into our estrangement and separation from his Father, he shared his richness in love and holiness with us, and he lives now to continue bringing you and me back to his Father, who, like the father in the parable, ever sees us, and ever has compassion on us.

And so this story truly is the greatest story ever told. It is the story of sin and repentance, of forgiveness and reconciliation. But above all, it is the story of God's love for you and for me in sending his Son to be one of us, so that we might live in him and he in us.

To him, and “to our God and Father, be all glory, for ever and ever. Amen.”

(Philippians 4:20, RSV)